

How to Manage Back-to-School Stress and Anxiety During All This Uncertainty

Source: [Real Simple](#)

When worries over the coming school year seem to fly through the roof, turn to these expert tips for helping the whole family to feel more relaxed. Working mom Stephanie Smith, vice president of content and marketing for an Atlanta-based company, rates her anxiety a 10 out of 10 right now. “It came down a little from May to June, but once [COVID-19] cases started spiking again, and we started to know people first-hand who had it and second-hand who had died, we [thought], whoa – what if we don’t go back to school in the fall?” she recalls.

It’s not only fear of the coronavirus causing Smith’s anxiety to flare. She and her husband, who works in advertising, are also gravely concerned about their ability to continue to do their jobs while trying to homeschool their children, 6-year-old Gibson and 19-month-old Tilly. “I’m not nearly as productive of an employee when I am teaching school as well as working,” she says.

Smith’s family is far from alone. Millions of families around the country are grappling with decisions surrounding whether to send their kids back to school – that is, if they even have the option. Some schools are planning to reopen for classes in August, while others are offering virtual learning or remaining closed entirely, leaving parents to make difficult choices for themselves and their children.

A recent poll from ABC News/Ipsos showed that 45 percent of parents don’t want their children in the classroom at all. The stress surrounding back-to-school this year can feel unbearable at times, but knowing that it’s normal to feel this way – and that you’re not alone – is a good way to begin to manage your anxiety. Here’s what else mental health and medical experts recommend for keeping your cool amid the uncertainty of the moment.

Acknowledge the stress.

Everyone’s situation is different, and we all have unique support systems (or lack thereof), whether or not we live near family and friends who can help care for children when they’re out of school. Regardless of your arrangement, the first step toward dealing with the anxiety you’re experiencing is to notice it. “I would encourage parents to share this feeling with their partners or other family and friends,” says Michael Consuelos, MD, a senior medical advisor with mental health management platform NeuroFlow in Philadelphia.

Build a support network.

Once you’ve identified your anxiety, look to your support system to help reduce or at least manage it. This might include reaching out to other parents for help and support, says Dr. Consuelos. Commiserating with those who are in the same boat as you can help alleviate some of the stress you’re feeling, and allow you to collectively brainstorm solutions, rather than wallow in the problems.

If you anticipate having to do some teaching from home, tag-team supplemental learning with your support systems. “Find a friend who’s good at math, or use the person who’s always correcting grammar to help with language skills,” advises Elizabeth Derickson, MSW, LCSW, RPT, a therapist with online therapy provider Talkspace. Don’t be afraid to reach out and join

forces with other families to help not only yourself but your friends and your school community as well, she adds.

Practice self-care.

This is vital right now, says Derickson. You should have a self-care plan in place and find a few people in your network who can help you stick to your plan. Virtual support can also come in handy. For example, Smith found she started stress-eating more in the first few months of quarantine. She has since made changes to stay accountable and make healthier choices for her body – especially when the stress-eating temptation kicked back in after learning her son’s school would be doing at least the first nine weeks virtually. Smith is also taking salt baths a few times a week, practicing meditation every morning, and walking outside during phone meetings to prioritize her health.

Get into meditation as a family.

It can sound hokey if you’ve never practiced it before, but meditation does help a lot with anxiety – and you can include the kids, too, says Kathleen Rivera, MD, a psychiatrist who specializes in children and adolescents, at Nuvance Health in Danbury, Conn. She recommends using the PeaceOut podcast, which blends short stories with visualization and breathing exercises to help children to calm down and relax.

Repeat this mantra: “The kids will be fine.”

“In many ways, this is easier for the kids than the parents,” says Charles Herrick, MD, chair of psychiatry at Nuvance Health. Parents are juggling so many other responsibilities – jobs, finances – and they’re now having to deal with decision-making around education in a way they’ve never had to before. On the other hand, the good news is that kids are pretty resilient, says Dr. Herrick. In study after study of people exposed to traumatic events, kids tend to do the best adapting to their new or changed circumstances.

But don’t be anxious in front of them.

Kids pick up on their parents’ well-being. “If parents are anxious and making statements that they’re worried about this or that, younger kids especially are going to pick that up,” says Dr. Rivera. They might parrot the same phrases you used without necessarily understanding the meaning behind it. If you do need to vent to your partner, friend or family member, do so behind closed doors.

Have open conversations.

Dr. Rivera strongly encourages talking with your children about the situation, no matter their age, asking them specific questions about their feelings. For example, she’s asked her own daughter, who’s going into first grade, the following: What do you miss the most about being in school? What are the things you don’t miss? How is learning this new way working for you? “Not every 5-year-old is able to have this conversation, but you can bring it down to their cognitive level,” she adds.

To warm up younger children to conversations, try providing them with paper, colored pencils, crayons or markers, says Claudia Kohner, PhD, a licensed psychologist and creator of the introduction to Very, Very Big Feelings app. Help them create a homemade book you can

read together that describes the changes and feelings your child is experiencing. You can also encourage imaginative play, in which dolls or toys represent the teacher and children in a classroom, so your child can communicate feelings about returning (or not returning) to school through playtime, Kohner says.

Involve them in decisions – to an extent.

Having kids involved in the parents' decision-making process, particularly adolescents, is very important because they value the social interactions they get at school so highly, says Rivera. "This doesn't mean a 5- or 10-year-old should be making a decision [about whether to go back to school], but it is important to take into consideration what their needs are," she says.

Equip your kids with situational knowledge.

This is the best thing you can do to help keep your kids safe if they will be going back to school this fall, says Fran Walfish, PsyD, MFT, a family and relationship psychotherapist based in Beverly Hills, Calif. Talk to them about what social distancing means, how to wash their hands thoroughly (and often), and other timely lessons.

She advises role playing: Pretend you're your daughter's classmate and come very close to her, asking to borrow a pencil – then ask her what she would do in that situation. Or, question your son about how he'd handle it if a friend came up and grabbed a basketball out of his hands on the playground. "Make up real-life situations and get your kids to think in advance about what they would say or do to protect themselves while preserving a friendship," says Walfish. The key is to equip them with the necessary tools and strategies they will need before the real situation arises.

Evaluate your stress levels.

Think about your mental health in terms of functioning, says Dr. Rivera. Feeling stressed is very normal right now while we're all facing so much uncertainty about the future. But if your anxiety gets to a point where it becomes so overwhelming that it's affecting your daily functioning – in your job, in your relationships, in your sleep habits – it may be time to seek the help of a professional, she adds. To help improve your overall well-being, focus on sleeping well, eating well, and exercising – all shown to be natural ways of releasing some anxiety and staying in a healthy place from a mental health perspective, says Dr. Rivera.

Take back control where you can.

While the world feels like it's changing by the minute, it helps to gain back some semblance of normalcy by controlling what you can control, says Dr. Herrick. For example, if you decide you want to homeschool your children, take initiative to build some socialization into their program during the week by coming together with your community. It's important for parents to network with other parents and build a variety of activities for their children that include not just cognitive learning, but the emotional and social components that go along with it. This can give the feeling of control over your child's learning situation, even if they aren't in a "normal" school routine.

If you decide to send kids back to school, regain control by creating a ritualized transition for them when they arrive back home: things like using hand sanitizer, undressing, putting their

clothes in a plastic bag, and heading straight for the bath, Dr. Herrick says. “This will help alleviate anxiety about bringing COVID-19 into the home,” he adds.

Know that you can change your mind.

“Flexibility is the most important thing in this whole process,” says Dr. Rivera. Regardless of what decision you make today, things might look different in a few months, or even a few weeks from now – and that’s OK. Ultimately, you should base your decisions around what feels comfortable for your family right now, but also be honest with yourself that it could change. You have every right to reverse the decision you make down the road.

Give yourself a break.

Be kind to yourself as a parent. That’s the number-one piece of advice Derickson would give to families continuing to struggle with back-to-school anxiety. “You don’t have to do it all,” she says. Set yourself up with realistic expectations, and understand that you’re going to have both good and bad days. Then, “allow yourself to learn from the bad days, move on, and rock those good days.”